

Women entrepreneurship orientation, networks and firm performance in the tourism industry in resource-scarce contexts

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on network theory, this study examines how the entrepreneurship orientation (EO)-performance nexus is intermediated by networks firms establish with government agencies, suppliers, and resource acquisition. Structural equation modelling is used to test the model on a sample of 556 women tourism entrepreneurs in Ghana and Nigeria. Findings indicate that EO positively influences firms' social ties, resource acquisition, and performance. The results also indicate that establishing strong ties with government agencies leads to more resource acquisition among women owned tourism businesses than strong business ties with suppliers. Furthermore, business ties are more beneficial when they mediate the effect of EO on performance and become weak and negative when the effect is sequentially mediated by business ties and network resource acquisition. Political ties negatively influenced performance. This study provides novel insights into the EO, networks and performance nexus in resource-scarce contexts. The managerial implications for supporting women entrepreneurs are critically examined.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) is a cardinal concept in entrepreneurship research (Jiang, Liu, Fey, & Jiang, 2018). EO is a strategic posture that describes the procedures and actions that offer businesses with the foundation for tactical decisions and actions (Jiang et al., 2018; Mehrabi, Coviello, & Ranaweera, 2019). EO mainly relates to the innovative, proactive, and risk-taking behaviours of businesses and is therefore considered a key driver of firm performance (Wang, Dass, Arnett, & Yu, 2020). Despite considerable research attention given to the relationship between EO and firm performance, the EO-performance relationship remains inconsistent (Anderson, Kreiser, Kuratko, Hornsby, & Eshima, 2015; Jiang et al., 2018). While some scholars have found that EO positively impacts firm performance, others have made inconsistent findings including identifying a non-linear relationship, or no relationship at all (Jiang et al., 2018).

Accordingly, researchers have proposed different explanations to help clarify the EO-performance relationship including environmental (Shirokova, Bogatyreva, Beliaeva, & Puffer, 2016), cultural specificities (Kim & Patel, 2017; Rigtering, Eggers, Kraus, & Chang, 2017), firm size (Gupta & Batra, 2016), and leadership style (Engelen, Gupta, Strenger, & Brettel, 2015), among others. Other researchers have also attempted to clarify the EO-performance relationship by introducing the concepts of information acquisition, learning orientation, knowledge creation and innovation actions (Kollman & Stockmann, 2014; Jiang et al., 2018; Ying, Hassan, & Ahmad, 2019). Nonetheless, these studies focused on internal firm factors as explanatory variables to explain the EO-performance relationship without considering the potential role of external networks within which firms operate. External networks provide useful contexts to understand how firms operate since networks considerably influence how organisations are nurtured, managed, and sustained (Baker, Grinstein, & Harmancioglu, 2016; Jiang et al., 2018;

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Robins, 2015).

While there are some exceptions in the extant literature (e.g., Su, Xie & Wang, 2015; Jiang et al., 2018), networks have not been considered within tourism research as a potential explanatory variable of the EO-performance relationship among tourism firms, particularly women owned tourism enterprises in sub-Saharan Africa. Nonetheless, due to long established and dominant patriarchal beliefs and practices, women entrepreneurs in most parts of Africa are likely to encounter stereotypes, and gendered constraints in acquiring both internal and external networks to further their EO agenda towards enhancing the performances of their firms (Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019). Women entrepreneurs are expected to abide by dominant social norms which projects them as intrusive and promiscuous if they persist and actively seek networks with other people or organisations, especially male-led organisations (Kimbu, Ngoasong, Adeola, & Afenyo-Agbe, 2019). Besides, women entrepreneurs are cast as people with low entrepreneurial orientation and therefore have little or no ability to acquire and maximise networks on the same competitive level as their male counterparts (Kimbu et al., 2019; Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019). Consequently, little is known about how networks intervene in the EO-performance relationship amongst women owned tourism businesses, particularly in developing countries where networks are central to firm performance (Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019). Specifically, there is dearth of knowledge to explain and clarify how network factors intervene and influence the relationship between EO-performance for women owned tourism firms even though the gendered context helps to shape networks and further determines the influence of networks on firm performance (Kimbu et al., 2019; Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019). Therefore, using a network approach, this study aims to examine the mediating role of network approach through external networks (social ties and network resource acquisition) in the EO-firm performance relationship amongst women owned tourism businesses in Ghana and Nigeria.

We leverage network theory to achieve the objectives of this paper and by so doing, this study makes two insightful contributions to theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, this study extends existing knowledge on the EO-performance relationship that has so far ignored network resource acquisition as external mediator in the context of women owned tourism businesses. Thus, this study's focus on women owned tourism businesses in the context of developing countries is a departure from previous works (e.g. Jiang et al., 2018) that have ignored the gendered nuances of external networks in explaining the EO-performance relationship, particularly in resource-scarce contexts where dominant patriarchal views and practices define network resource acquisition as the preserve of male entrepreneurs (Kimbu et al., 2021; Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019; Zhang, Kimbu, Lin, & Ngoasong, 2020). By ignoring the unique context of women in dominant patriarchal societies, previous studies have not expanded knowledge beyond the structuralist perspective that currently dominate the literature. This study ergo introduces a new perspective by deconstructing the general structural approaches adopted in the literature until now, by focusing on women owned tourism businesses, hence providing valuable insight on the EO-performance connection from the perspective of network resource acquisition.

Further, by situating this study in sub-Saharan Africa, we make a significant contribution to the literature by demonstrating how social ties (business and political ties) interactively affect firm performance amongst women tourism entrepreneurs in resource scarce environments. This illuminates how women tourism entrepreneurs are able to acquire and use political and social ties in environments characterised by structural patriarchal constraints that thwarts women's ability to network (Kapiga & Montero, 2017). Practically, the findings of this study could offer potential insights to women tourism entrepreneurs and managers on how cultivating business and political ties could help them attract and utilise resources from members of their networks to enhance their firm performance. Similarly, the study offers clarity to women entrepreneurs and managers in the tourism industry on the exact role of

network resource acquisition in firm performance and suggests that they could potentially invest in attracting such network resources if they are interested in maximising their EO potentials to achieve better performance. This could be one way for women tourism entrepreneurs to nurture and grow their businesses in Africa in the midst of the gender-based constraints they face in getting access to credit, market and other opportunities (Kapiga & Montero, 2017; Kimbu et al., 2021). Thus, by enhancing their networks, they could potentially acquire resources to overcome any male-dominated structural barriers they encounter. To theorize and confirm this novel approach, we tested our framework by intertwining two sources of data collected from women entrepreneurs in two sub-Saharan Africa countries: Ghana and Nigeria. Nigeria and Ghana provide good settings for a study of this nature in sub-Saharan Africa as they are home to West Africa's largest and second largest economies respectively, with Nigeria doubling as Africa's largest economy. Both also have significant tourism sectors (African Development Bank Group, 2019). The next section develops a theoretical foundation and hypotheses, followed by a description of the study methods. The findings, discussion and conclusions are then presented.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Concept of entrepreneurial orientation

Entrepreneurial orientation (EO) is the tactical positioning of a firm embodying its entrepreneurial decision-making techniques, procedures, and practices (Boso, Story, & Cadogan, 2013; Dai & Si, 2018). EO reflects how a firm explicitly or implicitly chooses to operate and project its characteristics as one that engages in creative and risk-taking endeavours and strives to be a market leader in coming up with proactive innovations to gain a competitive edge (Wang et al., 2020). Over the last four decades, EO has witnessed significant theoretical and empirical developments without an associated interest in women owned micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the tourism industry, especially in resource scarce contexts such as Africa. Thus, while significant attention has been paid to EO, there is little focus on the gender dimensions of EO within the tourism literature. Subsequently, women tourism entrepreneurs are held to account on the dominant structural (patriarchal) understandings of EO despite the significant socio-cultural, political and institutional constraints they encounter in their entrepreneurial journeys (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016; Koloba, 2017). Traditionally, structural accounts of women entrepreneurs present them as lacking a high sense of EO as compared to their fellow men (Koloba, 2017). This biased and patriarchal normative assumption of the entrepreneurial ability of women has made it unclear how women owned tourism MSMEs in Africa operate in relation to the dimensions of EO and its subsequent impacts on their networks and firm performance.

Researchers have conceptualised EO from two main perspectives, as a composite (unidimensional) concept (Vega-Vazquez et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2020) and as a multi-dimensional concept (Covin & Lumpkin, 2011). As a unidimensional concept, EO is viewed as consisting of three dimensions of innovativeness, proactiveness and risk-taking (Boso et al., 2013; Dai & Si, 2018; Vega-Vazquez et al., 2016). On this perspective, these three dimensions cumulatively account for EO such that the presence of all three indicates the existence of EO (Dai & Si, 2018). Therefore, EO is manifested only when a firm exhibits all three dimensions of innovativeness, proactiveness and risk-taking behaviour. Innovativeness measures the tendency of a firm to favour new ideas, experiment and undertake creative processes that depart from the established norms and practices (Jiang et al., 2018). Proactiveness, on the other hand, relates to the ability of a firm to anticipate and act on future needs of the market and therefore, gaining the first-mover advantage in relation to competitors (Jiang et al., 2018). Risk-taking pertains to the willingness to commit resources to actions that are associated with high possibility of failure since the outcomes of such actions are mostly unknown (Jiang et al., 2018).

From the multi-dimensional perspective, EO is conceived as encapsulating a set of independent organisation level behaviour consisting of the dimensions of risk taking, innovativeness, proactiveness, competitive aggressiveness, and autonomy. Under this conception, each of the individual dimensions are independent of the other and therefore EO can manifest when any one of the dimensions are present either in silo or in combination (Covin & Lumpkin, 2011). Both conceptualisations of EO have been widely used in the literature as none is considered a better measure over the other (Covin & Lumpkin, 2011). Covin and Lumpkin (Covin & Lumpkin, 2011) further note that it does not matter whether EO is conceived as a unidimensional or multi-dimensional concept since this is a theoretical issue and not an empirical matter and that empirical results only reveal the extent to which the dimensions of EO are correlated in practice. However, given that a number of studies (Covin & Wales, 2012; Jiang et al., 2018) have conceptualised EO as a unidimensional concept and also that EO entails being forward-looking and thinking, risk-taking and pioneering in the market to achieve competitive advantage, we conceive EO to be a unidimensional construct entailing proactiveness, innovativeness, and risk-taking.

2.2. Network approach: social ties and network resource acquisition

Resource acquisition through established networks subsequently referred to as network resource acquisition (NRA) describes the extent to which a firm accesses, attracts and acquires valuable resources from the members of its network (Jiang et al., 2018). Network factors are varied and thus may enhance or inhibit the ability of a firm to acquire cross-boundary resources (Boso et al., 2013; Kim, Steensma, & Park, 2017). Therefore, the influence of a firm's EO on its NRA could depend on the social ties that it builds with members in its network. For instance, Ngoasong and Kimbu (2016) and Kimbu et al. (2019) established that social ties in the form of collaborative networks are crucial to enabling entrepreneurs' access to much needed financial and non-financial resources as well as enhancing (women) entrepreneurs' capacity and capabilities and thereby improved the resilience of their tourism businesses. This suggests that in resource scarce contexts, the ability of a firm to acquire resources is dependent on its social ties since such resources are mostly and easily acquired from established ties. Therefore, firms actively seek out social ties for the purpose of exploiting and acquiring resources (Kimbu et al., 2019).

Social ties in this context are categorised into two, namely business ties and political ties (Jiang et al., 2018; Zhou, Su, & Shou, 2017). Business ties represent the relationship that a firm has with its business community including suppliers, customers, competitors and collaborators, whereas political ties reflect the relationship a firm has with government agencies including regulatory and supporting bodies (Jiang et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2017). Through business ties, firms benefit by exchanging information and resources with members within their networks and also enhance their legitimacy (Fan, Liang, Liu, & Hou, 2012). In so doing, firms benefit by accessing the required financial support as well as advanced information on impending changes in government regulations and policies (Sun, Mellahi, & Wright, 2012). Ultimately, these two types of social ties have distinct value as they provide firms with varied resources and competence (Li et al., 2009; Pollack, Vanepps, & Hayes, 2012).

Though women tourism entrepreneurs stand to enhance their network resource acquisition through social ties, their ability to establish such ties is challenged in comparison to their male counterparts (Kimbu et al., 2019). Traditional and structural business views cast women entrepreneurs as being less aggressive and competitive and thus less interested in pursuing and establishing networks (Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2016, 2019). Meanwhile, the act of seeking and pursuing networks in the form of social ties is considered to be a masculine performance, since men are perceived as possessing the required desire and acumen to pursue such endeavours (Kapinga & Montero, 2017). Therefore, women entrepreneurs are held back from establishing both

political and business ties and obliged to acquire network resources using masculine stereotypes. In some cases, especially in developing countries, they are simply shut out just because they are women. In most developing countries including Ghana and Nigeria, women are socio-culturally expected to be less competitive compared to men while their ability to establish ties and acquire network resources toward productive outcomes are doubted (Kapinga & Montero, 2017; Kimbu et al., 2019). Nonetheless, women entrepreneurs require social ties to be able to acquire the needed resources to overcome the numerous gendered challenges they encounter on the open market on account of being women (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016; Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2016).

2.3. Firm performance

Firm performance has been conceived and measured in different ways. A common approach is the two-dimensional measure of performance encompassing outcome-based financial indicators and operational measures (Runyan, Droge, & Swinney, 2008; Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986). Financial measures involve the use of direct financial-based outputs of the firm such sales growth, return on sales, net profit, gross profit, net cash flow, sales, cash flow and change in number of employees (as a proxy for growth) to determine how well a firm has fared in an operational period (Lumpkin & Dess, 2001). The financial based output is an objective measure as reflected in the firm's financial indicators. Operational (non-financial) measures of performance are concerned with organisational goals including owners' and managers' subjective assessment of how well a firm is performing based on some performance criteria, their satisfaction with performance, customer ratings, global success ratings by the business community or recognised international bodies (Jiang et al., 2018). Unlike the financial measures of performance, the non-financial performance is subjective (Runyan et al., 2008).

While the objective measure of firm performance stands to give an accurate picture of how well or otherwise a firm is performing, it is usually not easy to obtain financial records (Kapinga & Montero, 2017; Kimbu et al., 2019). This is especially so in developing countries for a number of reasons. First, for the purposes of tax avoidance, businesses usually under-report their financial measures of performance and therefore such measures tend to be unreliable (Kimbu et al., 2019). Also, there is usually a poor financial record keeping culture in most of the micro, small and medium sized enterprises in developing countries, underpinned either by financial illiteracy on the part of the owners and/or the corrupt intent of financial record keepers (Kapinga & Montero, 2017). In the context of women owned micro, small and medium sized tourism enterprises, it is the case that most of these women lack the necessary financial literacy and therefore do not keep proper financial records (Kimbu et al., 2019). As a result of the reasons enumerated above, we found it practical to use the subjective measure of performance in this study since it was difficult-to-impossible to obtain financial records of the women tourism entrepreneurs. Here, we follow the example of Anderson et al. (2015) by measuring firm performance as an aggregate sum of the ratings of performance criteria and an assessment of the entrepreneurs' satisfaction with performance. By using the subjective measure of performance, we also eschew the traditional and structuralist conception of firm performance as reflected in financial indicators which mostly portray women entrepreneurs as being less successful performers (Kapinga & Montero, 2017). Through the subjective measurement, we are able to account for the subjectively constructed accounts of the women entrepreneurs' views on firm performance.

2.4. Hypotheses development

2.4.1. Entrepreneurial orientation, political ties, business ties, and network resource acquisition

EO is an important driver in the pursuit of both political and social

ties. All the dimensions of EO – innovativeness, proactiveness and risk-taking – require that a firm will actively pursue political and social ties in order to exploit the resources associated with such ties to achieve the objectives of EO. Specifically, political ties are imperative to firms since they connect them with relevant government organisations. Political ties are therefore an important success factor for firms, especially in developing countries (including Ghana and Nigeria) where government controls a vast amount of resources, as well as information that is pertinent to organisations (Sun, Mellahi, Wright, & Xu, 2015). Government through its agencies and departments is also responsible for resource allocation, award of contracts and projects, access to certain types of raw materials and markets among others (Shi, Markoczy, & Stan, 2014). In some instances, political ties are enough to prove the credit worthiness of firms to secure loans or credit facilities from financial institutions (Shi, Markoczy, & Stan, 2014). Nonetheless, the ability of a firm to actively pursue political ties could be underpinned by its EO. High EO firms will want to obtain important information on future economic and political developments as well as industry regulation frameworks and would, therefore, capitalise and enhance their resource-seeking opportunities through political ties. Such firms perceive political ties as a means of enhancing their capability in acquiring more network resources and the associated opportunities (both present and future) through proactive and risk-taking propensities to grow their businesses.

Similar to political ties, the formation of business ties is closely tied to a firm's EO inclination. Firms that have high EO are expected to be proactive, innovative and open to taking risks in establishing and expanding their business ties in order to enjoy the associated benefits of information exchange and resource sharing. As a result of the information exchange and trust advantages associated with business ties, firms with higher EO seek more business ties and therefore accumulate vast resources from their established business networks (Dai & Si, 2018). The forward and outward-looking nature of high EO firms positions them to identify, seek, and acquire business ties and also leverage the resources found within these ties for better performance (Zhang, Soh, & Wong, 2010). Such advantages aid the firms to locate resources, accurately access the value of the resource and thereby enhance the performance of their operations. Conversely, a low EO adversely affects a firm's ability to establish the required business ties due to the fact that such a firm will be less proactive and innovative and thus will not venture into exploring relationships with operators of other businesses.

Despite this, the ability to establish political and social ties especially in developing countries (including Ghana and Nigeria) is skewed towards male entrepreneurs (Kimbu et al., 2019). Women entrepreneurs are hampered by socio-cultural and structural challenges that hinder their ability to actively pursue political and social ties (Goyal & Yadav, 2014; Kapinga & Montero, 2017). Women entrepreneurs often have to combine the hectic role of being entrepreneurs with their family and social roles of being home keepers, which often deprives them of the needed time and resources to pursue political and social ties. Structurally, women are deprived of the opportunities to participate in activities that contribute to seeking political and social ties and often encounter socio-cultural stereotypes when they actively seek ties with government institutions and other business organisations (Kimbu et al., 2019; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016). Women entrepreneurs who exhibit high political and social ties seeking initiatives are labelled as being aggressive and sometimes promiscuous when the heads of the institutions or organisations they seek to establish the ties with are men (Kimbu et al., 2019). This often restricts their initiative in seeking political and social ties, even though they stand to benefit more from such ties due to the systematic and structural challenges they encounter in their business operations (Goyal & Yadav, 2014; Kapinga & Montero, 2017). Consequently, women entrepreneurs in most developing countries limit their ties seeking activities to networks of women entrepreneurs since they share similar ideas and experiences and by so doing do not also upset the patriarchal social expectations of them not to overly mingle

and intrude in spaces meant for male entrepreneurs (Goyal & Yadav, 2014; Kapinga & Montero, 2017). Nonetheless, those with high EO inclination are able to establish political and social ties to their benefit (Kimbu et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). Thus, we propose:

H1_a: EO positively influences political ties.

H1_b: EO positively influences business ties.

EO serves as a cornerstone that drives network resource acquisition among organisations (Li, Liu, & Liu, 2011). From the viewpoint of networking, EO is a strategic tool that drives the conception and actions that build relationships among firms and other stakeholders. The acquisition of resources outside of a firm is a critical entrepreneurial activity (Kim et al., 2017). Therefore, firms with a high EO agenda are likely to vigorously identify and pursue resource seeking and acquisition opportunities from their network. All dimensions of EO, namely innovativeness, proactiveness and risk-taking, improve network resource acquisition. Innovativeness can encourage exploratory learning behaviours leading to pre-emptive network acquisition activities (Jones & Macpherson, 2006; Kollman & Stockmann, 2014). Also, firms may be required to exploit shared resources with network actors in order to meet the demands of innovativeness, hence implying that high EO firms will be high on network resource acquisition (NRA). Meanwhile, high EO firms have high risk tolerance which may be induced by the firms' desire to tolerate uncertainty in dealing with its network and will therefore not hesitate to enter collaborations for resource acquisition. In the same vein, proactive firms act quicker and thus could lead to more resource acquisition (Morgan & Strong, 2003) thereby helping such firms to take advantage of the surrounding resource acquisition opportunities in their environments. Overall, EO will have a direct positive effect on NRA such that the higher a firm's EO, the greater the effort it will exert to access and acquire more network resources. We, therefore, posit that:

H1_c: EO positively influences network resource acquisition.

2.4.2. Political ties, social ties, and network resource acquisitions

Political ties are an important aspect of networks especially for women entrepreneurs in resource scarce contexts such as Ghana and Nigeria. Political ties position firms to network with government organisations, departments and agencies (Sami, Rahnavard, & Tabar, 2019) which make it possible to access and acquire resources through such networks (Sami et al., 2019; Zhang, Tan, & Wong, 2015). For women entrepreneurs, ties with government organisations and agencies is crucial to their ability to gain competitive advantages (Kimbu et al., 2019). This is particularly so in developing countries where governments own substantial resources and drive policies that directly impact private enterprises (Jiang et al., 2018). In such situations, political ties are critical in helping women entrepreneurs bypass the bureaucracies involved, for example, in business registration, filing tax returns, gaining first-hand information and interpretation of impending government policies and even access to government incentives for MSMEs such as tax holidays and exemptions, and stimulus packages (Sun et al., 2012).

In other instances, political ties as a network facilitates the acquisition of credit and loan facilities from financial institutions as such networks are deemed appropriate collateral for granting credits and loans (Fan et al., 2012). Ultimately, political ties increase the network resource acquisition of firms such that firms with political ties are better positioned to acquire resources from their networks than those that do not have political ties. This is the same even for women entrepreneurs, though they may encounter greater structural and socio-cultural challenges in establishing political ties than male entrepreneurs. In this regard, women entrepreneurs are acknowledged to have less political ties and therefore acquire less resources than their male counterparts (Goyal & Yadav, 2014), yet the limited political ties they establish helps them to acquire network resources. Therefore, we propose:

H2_a: Political ties positively influence NRA.

Business ties, the networks established by a firm with other business organisations, helps the firm to acquire other resources available within

the business environment (Zhang et al., 2015). Business ties help firms to establish close networks with similar organisations which assist them in acquiring resources and gaining a competitive edge. Specifically, firms are able to acquire market and product information and also exchange other resources with other firms in their networks based on established business ties (Peng & Luo, 2000). Business ties are also an important source for acquiring network expertise where firms willingly exchange technical expertise with other firms within such business networks (Li et al., 2009; Pollack et al., 2012). In other instances, members of a business network intentionally withdraw from competing with other firms within their business ties and therefore help them to gain competitive edge (Zhang et al., 2015). By so doing, business ties are able to facilitate the acquisition of resources from members of a network suggesting that firms that have high business ties stand a greater chance to acquire more network resources than those without such ties. Even so, evidence suggests that women entrepreneurs feel comfortable establishing business ties with businesses owned by other women and are able to exploit these ties to acquire more collaborative resources to grow and sustain their businesses (Figueroa-Domecq, Kimbu, de Jong, & Williams, 2020; Kimbu et al., 2019). The socio-cultural challenges and other stereotypes encountered by women entrepreneurs, especially in developing countries, challenge women entrepreneurs' abilities to establish wider business ties and engage in NRA on the same scale as male entrepreneurs (Kapanga & Montero, 2017). Regardless of the gender peculiarities, business ties have the potency to enhance the acquisition of network resources (Li et al., 2009; Pollack et al., 2012). We therefore posit that:

H2_b: Business ties positively influence NRA.

2.4.3. Political ties, business ties, network resource acquisition and firm performance

Despite the prediction that high EO firms are likely to acquire more network resources and also record better firm performance, these relationships may sometimes be altered and acted upon by contextual factors that may in themselves directly influence firm performance. The influence of heterogeneity of contextual factors on firm performance needs to be recognised, especially in resource-scarce environments (Jiang et al., 2018). Specifically, there is a need to take into account the political ties of firms operating in developing economies where governments control and allocate vast amounts of resources. In such environments, the political ties acquired, possessed and exercised by firms could be a determining factor in their performance. Firms with political ties are able to gain access to and understand government policies and regulations to their advantage (Jiang et al., 2018). Also, they can anticipate future policies and regulations and make appropriate adjustments to accommodate them before they are even enacted. With such advance knowledge and information, as well as assistance from state agencies and people in influential positions, firms with political ties enjoy a monopolistic advantage by understanding and positioning themselves to benefit and enhance their business performance even though this can also sometimes create lock-in effects (Li et al., 2009; Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019). Within the hospitality and tourism sectors, firms such as hotels and food and beverage establishments with the requisite political ties may benefit from government business as they may be selected to host state/public guests' and events and therefore enhance their performance compared to their competitors, a situation that enhances performance. Thus:

H3_a: Political ties positively influence firm performance.

Like political ties, business ties are an important cornerstone for firm performance. By providing firms access to network information and sharing, they are able to innovate and/or create new products and ultimately gain a competitive edge (Sheng, Zhou, & Li, 2011). Business ties ergo help firms to build their adaptive capabilities in emerging volatile markets (Zhou et al., 2017) by enabling access to important and reliable market information, which they use to inform themselves of prevailing market changes and also forecast any potential future changes which helps them to innovative (Zhu et al., 2017). Moreover, such market

information helps the firms to attenuate the risks associated with market volatility and by so doing minimise potential losses and ultimately contribute to better performance. Further, close ties with firm partners as in the case of business ties helps to induce standards and behaviours by way of co-creative problem solving (Zhu et al., 2017). Such problem-solving norms and behaviours could help enhance the proactiveness and innovativeness of firms with business ties which could trigger superior performance. Women entrepreneurs owning tourism MSMEs in developing economies are able exploit business ties to gain access to raw materials and other inputs on credit to keep their businesses running even when they are unable to source capital to finance their businesses (Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019). They are also able to collaboratively create and share innovative knowledge and thereby improve the performance of their firms (Kimbu et al., 2019). Therefore, we anticipate that:

H3_b: Business ties positively influence firm performance.

The network theory opines that the ability of a firm to acquire resources from its network improves the performance of the firm. The acquisition of network resources results in the establishment of reliable avenues to gain access to and exchange resources, knowledge and information that enhances the performance (Jiang et al., 2018). Therefore, firms that engage in networking are able to access the required social ties and may gain competitive advantage by being able to favourably access privately owned market information, policy directives, and industry trends. Firms are able to plan in advance and adopt strategies to gain resources from both internal and external networks as a result of having access to industry and market knowledge. Also, such knowledge and information could be used to develop innovative new products and technologies and also identify and serve niche markets which results in enhanced firm performance (Dong, Li, & Tse, 2013; Du, Lu, & Tao, 2015; Sheng et al., 2011). We, therefore, anticipate that firms that are able to acquire resources through their networks will have better performance than those that are unable to acquire such resources from their networks, since the acquired resources place a firm in a favourable position to provide better-differentiated products, thereby satisfying customers and making profit (Sirmon, Hitt, & Ireland, 2007). Consequently, we posit that:

H3_c: Network resource acquisition positively influences firm performance.

2.4.4. Entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance

All the dimensions of EO (proactiveness, innovation and risk-tolerance) are conceptually believed to be drivers of high firm performance, and thus firms that are committed to EO are able to establish social ties (business and political ties) and leverage on all available benefits within and outside their networks to achieve results (Saeed, Yousafzai, & Engelen, 2014). Both conceptual and empirical arguments from previous studies share the same idea that firms stand to gain by pursuing novelty, receptiveness and a certain level of boldness (Tang & Tang, 2012). In environments characterised by swift change, truncated and unpredictable product and business lifecycles, there are no guarantees of future profit, and therefore, firms need to constantly explore new opportunities as encapsulated by EO. Firms that seek such innovations amid risks are consequently bound to attain a competitive edge which in turn will positively impact on their performance (Ireland, Hitt, & Sirmon, 2003; Kallmuenzer, Kraus, Peters, Steiner, & Cheng, 2019), hence the positive influence of EO on performance. It is therefore envisaged that high EO firms will record high performance, while low EO firms will be less proactive, innovative and risk-averse, and therefore may not be able to establish a competitive edge and hence will experience poor performance.

H4: EO positively influences firm performance.

2.4.5. The mediating effects of political ties, business ties and network resource acquisition

While EO has been established to positively influence firm

performance (Jiang et al., 2018; Kallmuenzer et al., 2019), the acquisition of resources from a firm's network has the potential to intervene in this relationship (Jiang et al., 2018). Network resource acquisition is therefore conceived as being a mediator in the relationship between EO and firm performance. Resource acquisition through established networks indicates the extent to which a firm is able to access, attract and acquire resources from members of its networks to improve its productive and competitive capacities (Pagano, Petrucci, & Bocconcelli, 2018) and therefore helps to improve the performance of the firm (Jiang et al., 2018). In this regard, firms that are able to acquire more resources from their networks are more likely to enhance the positive influence of EO on performance; though EO positively influences performance via firms capacity to acquire more resources to increase their productive and competitive abilities (Boso et al., 2013; Kim, Steensma, & Park, 2017). Firms embedded in networks therefore stand to enhance their performance through research and development (R&D) capacity which results in innovation hence leading to the promotion of value creation in product development and delivery (Zhao, Ishihara, & Jennings, 2020).

Political and business (social) ties are important antecedents to network resource acquisition and therefore an important mediator of the positive influence of EO on performance (Kallmuenzer et al., 2019). Through political ties, firms are able to gain access to and decipher government policies to their advantage and thus enhance the positive effect of EO on performance. While the initial EO inclination of a firm could spur a firm to achieve better performance, the benefits associated with political ties could further enhance the performance of the firm. Ultimately, political ties are expected to positively mediate the positive EO-performance relationship. In the same vein, business ties have the potency to intervene in the positive relationship between EO and performance. Business ties help firms to adapt to markets by enabling them to secure important market information, gain valuable productive information from other organisations and even acquire and exchange resources with organisations that they have ties with (Zhu et al., 2017). These adaptive and productive capabilities add to improve the positive influence of EO on performance in a way that firms without business ties will not achieve. Therefore, business ties are anticipated to mediate the positive effect of EO on performance. Therefore, we propose that:

H5_a: Political ties mediate the positive effect of EO on firm performance.

H5_b: Business ties mediate the positive effect of EO on firm performance.

H5_c: NRA mediates the positive effect of EO on firm performance.

Further, the direct positive effect of EO on performance as hypothesised could be mediated by network resource acquisition. Critically, the direct positive effect of EO on performance is underpinned by the idea that social ties and network resource acquisition are able to enhance the productive capacities of firms and thus improve their performance (Guo, Xu, & Jacobs, 2014; Sami et al., 2019). While this may be true, it is also the case that the benefits associated with both political and business ties do not automatically accrue or may not potentially be maximised in the EO-performance relationship (Sami et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2015). Thus, while political and business ties are a good foundation to access and exploit certain benefits to improve the EO-firm performance link, it is the case that not all firms will be able to acquire resources from such networks and therefore enhance their performance. In this regard, the positive effect of EO on performance is sequentially mediated by social ties and network resource acquisition in the sense that firms that are able to acquire more resources from these ties stand to improve on their performance more than those that acquire less or no resources from networks that they would have developed through these ties. Therefore, we anticipate that political ties, business ties and network resource acquisition will sequentially mediate the positive effect of EO on firm performance. Based on the foregoing discussion, we put forward the following hypotheses:

H6_a: Political ties and NRA sequentially mediate the positive effect of EO on firm performance.

H6_b: Business ties and NRA sequentially mediate the positive effect of EO on firm performance.

The proposed hypothesised conceptual framework is illustrated in Fig. 1.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study context and data collection procedure

Data were collected from women entrepreneurs who were owners and/or managers of tourism MSMEs in Ghana (Accra and Cape Coast) and Nigeria (Lagos). This study was restricted to women entrepreneurs only, to understand the role of external networks in the EO-performance relationship, in two patriarchal countries with systemic gendered socio-cultural, political and economic challenges that make it difficult for women-owned enterprises to establish external networks and therefore constrains access to resources that such networks offer to improve their viability (Boso et al., 2013; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016). Furthermore, there has been little empirical and theoretical focus on the role of external networks in the EO-firm performance nexus within the context of women-owned MSMEs in sub-Saharan Africa (Kimbu et al., 2019).

Nigeria and Ghana are home to West Africa's largest and second largest economies respectively, with Nigeria doubling as Africa's largest economy (African Development Bank Group, 2019). In Ghana, data were collected in the cities of Accra and Cape Coast while data for Nigeria were collected from the city of Lagos. Ghana has tourism as one of its main economic sectors as it is the fourth largest foreign exchange earner (Ghana Tourism Authority GTA, 2019). Its attractions are many and varied and include culture, heritage (carved around the remnants of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade), eco-attractions (national parks and forest reserves), sandy beaches (stretches from the west to east coast) as well as meetings and conventions within the West Africa sub-region (GTA, 2019). However, the country's tourism resources are concentrated in the southern part of the country with the cities of Accra, Cape Coast, and Kumasi being the epicentres (GTA, 2019). Accra, the political capital of Ghana hosts the country's only international airport, therefore making it the gateway for international tourist arrivals to the country. Also, the city is endowed with heritage sites including former slave forts and castles, sites of colonial and national importance as well as art and craft centres, theatres and vibrant night life. Cape Coast is described as the one of the epicentres of tourism in Ghana as it houses the country's most visited tourist attractions by both domestic and international tourists – Kakum National Park and Cape Coast Castle (both are World Heritage Sites). Additionally, the city is endowed with sandy beaches and close to another world heritage site, the Elmina Castle.

Contrary to Ghana, tourism is not the main economic sector of Nigeria, but it is still important to its economy. In 2019 tourism contributed 4.5% to GDP and 4.7% to employment (WTTC, 2020). This, however, indicates an upward movement, though some improvement is still required. The Nigerian tourism sector has several challenges that serve as bottlenecks in the growth of the sector. These include insecurity, corruption, poor infrastructure, inconsistent government policies, low level of technology and poor access to information, and neglected monument structures (Adeola, Eigbe, & Muritala, 2021). Lagos is the main gateway and commercial hub of Nigeria hosting most of the businesses in Africa's largest economy. As the commercial capital of Nigeria, it is vibrant with night life, and has an intensive events, leisure and entertainment sector as well as accommodation and food and beverage services for its numerous visitors. Characteristically, all three cities are dominated by tourism MSMEs with women entrepreneurs being visible in the ownership of micro and small tourism businesses, especially in the food and beverage, arts and crafts (souvenir), events, and accommodation sub-sectors.

Data were collected from women tourism entrepreneurs in all sub-sectors including accommodation, food and beverage, arts and crafts, tour operations and transportation. Multiple approaches were used to

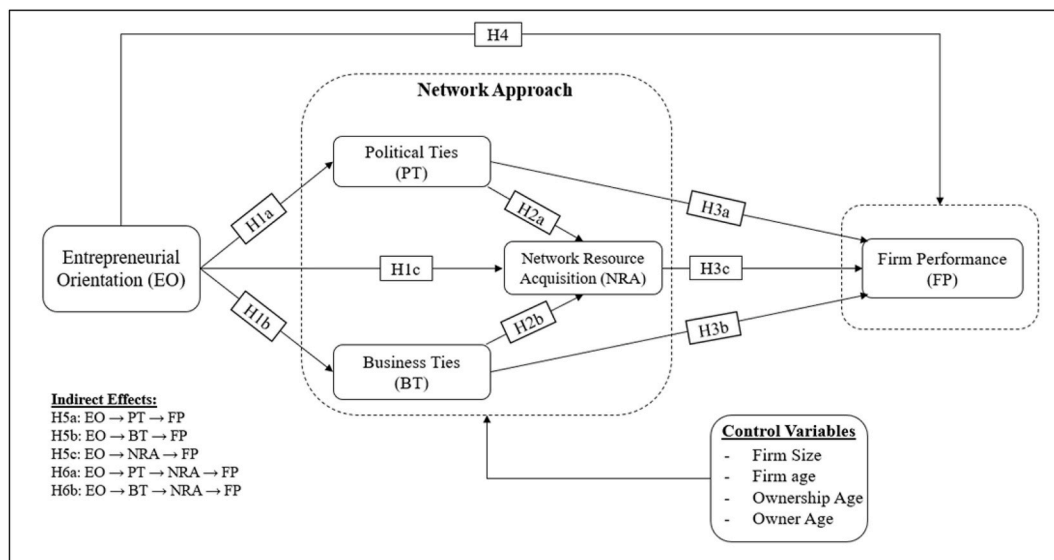


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

reach out to the women entrepreneurs for the survey. First, the list of women-owned tourism businesses was obtained from the Ghana Tourism Authority (Ghana) and Lagos State Tourism Board (Nigeria). Next, this list was complemented and updated with a list obtained from the network of women tourism entrepreneurs in both countries. These lists were synchronised, and the final list used as the sampling frame for each country and city. A stratified random sampling was then used to identify the individual women tourism entrepreneurs. First, the list for each city was disaggregated by tourism sub-sector. Second, a proportional allocation was completed for each sub-sector and third, a simple random sampling technique was used to draw the individual respondents. The paper questionnaires were administered to the selected respondents by trained field assistants who were trained on the content of the instrument, field protocols and data quality assurance measures. A substitution list was prepared and used to replace women entrepreneurs who were either unavailable during the data collection exercise or expressed unwillingness to participate in the study. This data collection sampling approach resulted in a reliable dataset and it has been widely used by previous studies in entrepreneurship (see e.g., Dai, Maksimov, Gilbert, & Fernhaber, 2014; Dai & Si, 2018; Zhao & Lu, 2016). Data were simultaneously collected in each of the three cities from 1st April 2019 to 30th May 2019. Overall, 600 questionnaires were administered in both countries (Nigeria 320 and Ghana 280). Due to the presence of missing data, 44 questionnaires were discarded resulting in 556 (Nigeria 300 and Ghana 256) valid responses retained for data analysis. This sample size was found to be large enough to run covariance-based structural equation modelling (Kline, 2016).

3.2. Construct measurement

All measures are validated scales adapted from the literature. Where appropriate, the items were reworded to better capture the context of the study. All the items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”, unless otherwise stated.

Entrepreneurial orientation (EO), used in this study as a second-order construct, was measured using the 9-item entrepreneurial orientation (EO) scale developed by Covin and Slevin (1989) which is widely used due to its popularity and robustness in international research settings (Runyan, Ge, Dong, & Swinney, 2012). We treated EO as three reflective first-order constructs: proactiveness ($\alpha = 0.86$), innovativeness ($\alpha = 0.81$) and risk taking ($\alpha = 0.83$), as suggested by Covin and Wales (2012, p. 678), who advocate that “reflective measurement models are often

most appropriate for assessing EO”. *Network Resource Acquisition* (NRA) was measured with 4-items adapted from Sirmon et al. (2007), Jiang et al. (2018) and Wiklund and Shepherd (2005) to measure the extent to which businesses acquired resources from their networks. The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “extremely low” to 5 “extremely high” ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Social ties were assessed by *business ties* and *political ties*. *Business ties* (BT) were assessed with Sheng et al.’s. (2011) four-items measure, which capture the extent to which a business has relationships with its network including suppliers and competitors ($\alpha = 0.71$). *Political ties* (PT) were assessed with a four-items scale borrowed from Li and Zhang (2007) and Peng and Luo (2000), to understand how a firm has established relationships with government agencies and politics ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Firm Performance (FP) was captured by five-items borrowed from Anderson et al. (2015). First, the owners/managers were asked to rate their level of importance on a 5-point Likert scale for each item ranging from (1 = of little importance to 5 = extremely important). Afterward, they were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with that same item on a second 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all satisfied to 5 highly satisfied). A weighted score was computed for each performance component by multiplying the “importance” score with the “satisfaction” score. The five items that came out in the calculation demonstrated a high reliability ($\alpha = 0.93$). This form of performance measurement has emerged in recent years by replacing the use of various financials or accounting indicators, market valuation or economic value with subjective or perception-based indicators of the degree of fulfilment of such financial indicators (Hernández-Perlines, Covin, & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2021; Lian & Yen, 2017; Mahto, Davis, Pearce II, & Robinson, 2010). This study used financial indicators assessed in terms of satisfaction. Some demographic questions were also included in the questionnaire to better profile the respondents.

3.3. Control variables

To address possible confounding effects, we controlled for four factors theorized to affect network approach and firm performance: *firm size*, *firm age*, *entrepreneur age* and *entrepreneur tenure*. Firm size was measured with the total number of employees. Firm size is commonly agreed to influence the firm access to resources and expand social network ties that may influence resource acquisition (Yin, Hughes, & Hu, 2020). Firm age was assessed by the years that the firm had been operating. As argued by several scholars (Beatty & Zajac, 1994; Cai,

Hughes, & Yin, 2014) the younger the firm the more resources they need and the more they are interested in cultivating strong social ties (i.e. *business ties* and *political ties*). Older firms accumulate more resources and establish stronger social ties with their networks and influence their firm performance (Beatty & Zajac, 1994; Yin et al., 2020). *Entrepreneur age* was operationalized as the length of time (in years) an entrepreneur had lived at the time of data collection. It is another factor that may influence firm resource acquisition and social networks. Some authors (Beatty & Zajac, 1994; Mas-Tur, Pinazo, Tur-Porcar, & Sánchez-Masferrer, 2015) found that businesses belonging to younger women usually face higher difficulties in accessing resources and to establish strong social networks because the age of the entrepreneur is perceived to provide an insufficient guarantee to investors, creditors, and suppliers. There is also evidence that an entrepreneur's age significantly predicts firm profitability (Wang, Holmes, Oh, & Zhu, 2016). This is particularly prominent within developing countries where young female entrepreneurs face difficulties to start a business due to limited access to resources and weak social networks and political ties (Allen, Langowitz, Elam, & Dean, 2008; Kimbu et al., 2019, 2021). Finally, *entrepreneur tenure* was operationalized as the length of time an entrepreneur spent as the owner of a venture. This effect has been widely studied as a proxy to influence network approach and firm performance (Liu, Fisher, & Chen, 2018; Wang et al., 2016). Liu et al. (2018) argue that an entrepreneur with longer tenure stands a better chance in establishing extensive external networks and also better understands the company nuances which positively affect access to resources and ultimately the performance of their venture.

3.4. Analytical strategy and preliminary statistical verification

The proposed model (Fig. 1) was tested using IBM AMOS version 27, following the two-step approach with maximum likelihood (ML) estimation recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and the path analysis approach was used to examine the effects of the constructs as proposed in the model. Both the measurement model and structural equation were tested for the validity, reliability, and goodness of fit indices as recommended in the literature (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). In the proposed model EO is treated as a second-order factor as per Covin and Wales' (2012) suggestion. The indirect effects were measured using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro model 80 with 10,000 bootstrap resamples.

Additionally, notwithstanding that the data were collected in two different countries in West Africa, common method bias (CMB) is likely, but not unavoidable, when a survey is used to collect data (Jordan & Troth, 2020; Spector, 2006). To mitigate the CMB issue, numerous procedural remedies were used following the recommendations proposed by several scholars (Fuller, Simmering, Atinc, Atinc, & Babin, 2016; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). First, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to the participants during data collection. Respondents were also informed that there are no right or wrong answers and were encouraged to answer as honestly as possible. Second, the questionnaire was carefully designed and piloted with fifty (50) respondents (25 in each country) to avoid item ambiguity and complexity and enhance the wording and relevance of questions (Dayour, Park, & Kimbu, 2019; Podsakoff et al., 2003). After the data collection, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to confirm whether CMB was present in the data collected in Nigeria and Ghana (Fuller et al., 2016; Podsakoff et al., 2003). All the items were loaded onto a single unrotated exploratory factor (in the exploratory factor analysis) and the highest variance explained by a single factor was 33.8%, suggesting that CMB was not a pervasive issue in the data (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Additionally, we tested for CMB by using a marker variable approach for potential bias responses (Fuller et al., 2016). The results indicated CMB is absent and highly unlikely to represent any threat to the data collected from female entrepreneurs in Nigeria and Ghana.

Furthermore, we assessed the normality of the data and no major concerns were detected since the values for both skewness and kurtosis provided by AMOS output were below 3.0 and 7.0 respectively (Ribeiro, Pinto, Silva, & Woosnam, 2018; West, Finch, & Curran, 1995), demonstrating the normality underlying the ML estimation of SEM and the suitability of data collected in Nigeria and Ghana. Table 2 presents these results as well as the descriptive statistics of the variables.

4. Results

4.1. Sample and firm characteristics

To test our model (Fig. 1), we used a sample of 556 female entrepreneurs operating in Nigeria (n = 300) and Ghana (n = 256), two developing sub-Saharan African countries. The respondents comprised mainly middle-aged entrepreneurs in the age groups of 40–49 years old (37%) and 30–39 years old (33.8%). Nearly three quarters (73.50%) were married and 42.6% of respondents were college or university educated. Table 1 summarizes the sociodemographic characteristics of the entrepreneurs and characteristics of their business. Nearly half (48.9%) of surveyed entrepreneurs had been in their current business for five years or less, while 37.9% had owned/managed their business for

Table 1
Descriptive summary of sample.

Sociodemographic and business characteristics	n	%
Countries (n = 546)		
Nigeria	300	54.9
Ghana	246	45.1
Age (n = 541)		
18–29	66	12.2
30–39	183	33.8
40–49	200	37.0
50–59	81	15.0
≥60	11	2.10
Marital status (n = 543)		
Single	64	11.80
Married	399	73.50
Living together	26	4.80
Divorced/Separated	25	4.60
Widow	29	5.30
Education (n = 544)		
Secondary school	75	13.9
High School	104	19.1
Technical/Vocational education/junior college	67	12.3
Undergraduate education	66	12.1
Graduate education	232	42.6
Firm Size (n = 543)		
1–5	295	54.3
6–10	126	23.2
11–15	64	11.8
16–20	32	5.9
21 or more	26	4.8
Firm age (years) (n = 541)		
1–5	243	44.9
6–10	216	39.9
11–15	50	9.2
16–20	17	3.1
21 or more	15	2.8
Entrepreneur Tenure (n = 535)		
5 years or less	259	48.4
6–10 years	203	37.9
11–15 years	45	8.4
16–20 years	14	2.6
More than 20 years	14	2.6
Business Type (n = 503)		
Accommodation	83	16.5
Formal restaurant	68	13.5
Informal restaurant (Chop bar)	163	32.4
Drinking spot (bar/pub)	49	9.7
Travel agency	69	13.7
Arts & craft	38	7.6
Other tourism sector	33	6.6

Table 2

Results of the measurement model: reliability and convergent validity.

Constructs and their indicators	Mean (SD)	Skewness	Kurtosis	Std. β
Entrepreneurial Orientation – Second-order				
Innovativeness	3.29 (0.69)	−0.17	−0.60	0.74
Proactiveness	3.55 (0.66)	−0.10	−0.52	0.92
Risk Taking	3.44 (0.64)	−0.05	−0.54	0.88
Business Ties ($\alpha = 0.71$)				
I have a good relationship with suppliers	4.29 (0.79)	−1.42	3.12	0.85
I have a good relationship with competitor firms	4.04 (0.96)	−0.97	0.83	0.63
Political Ties ($\alpha = 0.93$)				
Our firm has developed good connections with regulatory and supporting organizations (i.e., tax bureaus, banks, and commercial administration bureaus)	3.48 (1.29)	−0.72	−0.55	0.82
Our firm's relationship with local government agencies has been good	3.64 (1.29)	−0.94	−0.19	0.90
Our firm has spent substantial resources in building relationships with government agencies	3.40 (1.33)	−0.56	−0.83	0.88
Our firm has maintained good relationships with various levels of the government	3.62 (1.25)	−0.88	−0.19	0.89
Network Resource Acquisition ($\alpha = 0.94$)				
Our firm has maintained good relationships with various levels of the government agencies	2.78 (1.35)	0.09	−1.29	0.90
Our firm has easy access to (finance, human and physical i.e. land/property) capital, to support its operations	2.80 (1.35)	0.04	−1.30	0.93
We are able to obtain financial resources at short notice to support our operations	2.75 (1.34)	0.07	−1.29	0.82
We have substantial (financial, HR, physical) resources for funding expansion initiatives	2.89 (1.36)	−0.01	−1.27	0.85
Firm Performance ($\alpha = 0.93$)				
Total sales (Cedi/Naira)	4.15 (0.86)	−0.35	−0.67	0.87
Ability to fund growth from profits	3.97 (0.90)	0.09	−0.94	0.88
Return on investment	4.05 (0.90)	−0.14	−0.83	0.89
Profit to sales ratio	4.05 (0.87)	−0.05	−0.97	0.89
Cash flow	4.18 (0.87)	−0.40	−0.69	0.88

^a 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strong Agree.

10 years or more. More than half of the businesses were micro-enterprise with 5 or less employees (54.3%) and had been in operation for 5 years or less (44.9%). The entrepreneurs surveyed owned businesses ranging from informal (partial/unregistered and not licensed) restaurants (32.4%), formal (licensed and registered) restaurants (23.2%), accommodation (16.5%), travel and tour agencies (13.7%), arts and crafts (7.6%), and tourism education and consultancy (6.6%).

4.2. Testing the measurement model

First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was initially conducted to measure the convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs, prior to assessing the hypothesized relationships with structural equation modelling (SEM). The fit indices indicate that the measurement model adequately fits the data collected in Ghana and Nigeria: $\chi^2 = 474.59$, $df = 211$, $p = 0.000$, TLI = 0.96, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.048, and SRMR = 0.044. As depicted on Table 2, factor loadings are higher

than 0.60 (ranging from 0.63 to 0.93) and significant at 0.001 level. Moreover, all the composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.71 to 0.94, and the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.56 to 0.77 (Table 3) surpassing the threshold of 0.70 and 0.5 respectively, thereby establishing the convergent validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) of the measurement items. Furthermore, the square root of AVE of all constructs exceeded the correlations between the constructs, providing evidence that all the constructs in the model are deemed to have discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Lastly, the Cronbach Alpha (α) of all constructs are greater than the cut-off value of 0.70, suggesting good measurement reliability of all the latent factors (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) (Table 4).

4.3. Testing the structural model

After ensuring that the measurement model demonstrates an adequate fit index and is both reliable and valid, the structural model was assessed. The fit indices of the structural model fit the data well: $\chi^2 = 571.52$, $df = 218$, $\chi^2/df = 2.62$, $p = 0.000$, TLI = 0.95, CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.055, and SRMR = 0.055. The results of the hypotheses, containing the standardized path coefficients and the percentage of variance (R^2 value) are explained by the exogenous constructs. As shown in Fig. 2, all but 2 of the 9 direct hypotheses proposed were supported, except for H3_b and H5_b which were partially supported.

According to the results, EO significantly predicted political ties ($\beta = 0.377$, $p < 0.001$), business ties ($\beta = 0.232$, $p < 0.001$), and network resource acquisition ($\beta = 0.146$, $p < 0.01$), lending support to the H1a, H1b, and H1c. Political ties have significant positive influence on network research acquisition ($\beta = 0.420$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2a. Conversely, H2b was partially supported since business ties have significant but negative influence on network research acquisition ($\beta = -0.092$, $p < 0.05$). Political ties were found to negatively influence firm performance ($\beta = -0.119$, $p < 0.05$), partially supporting H3a. Both business ties ($\beta = 0.236$, $p < 0.001$) and network resource acquisition ($\beta = 0.224$, $p < 0.001$) positively and significantly predicted firm performance, supporting H3b and H3c. Moreover, EO positively predicted firm performance ($\beta = 0.236$, $p < 0.001$), lending support to H4. The R^2 values suggested that the model explained 14% of variance in political ties, 12% in business ties, 23% of the variance in firm network resource acquisition, and 52% in firm performance. Taken together, our findings suggest that the proposed model connecting EO, network approach (political ties, business ties and network resource acquisition) and firm performance is both theoretically and empirically sound.

4.4. Testing the mediating effects

Mediation analysis was conducted to test the indirect effect of EO on firm performance via political ties, business ties and network resource acquisition. We used Hayes (2018) PROCESS macro models 80 with 10,000 bootstrap resampling. The effect is statistically significant when the 95% confidence interval (CI) do not straddle zero. A summary of the

Table 3

Correlations and average variance extracted - discriminant validity.

	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	6
1. Entrepreneurial Orientation	0.88	0.72	0.85				
2. Business Ties	0.71	0.56	0.35	0.75			
3. Political Ties	0.93	0.76	0.36	0.36	0.87		
4. Network Research Acquisition	0.93	0.77	0.27	0.12	0.45	0.88	
5. Firm Performance	0.94	0.75	0.24	0.32	0.15	0.27	0.87

CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. The bold elements diagonal matrix are the square root of the average variance extracted; interconstruct correlations is shown off-diagonal.

Note: All correlations are significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.

Table 4

Bootstrap indirect effects of entrepreneurial orientation on firm performance.

	Effect	SE	95% CI LLCI	ULCI
Direct effect				
EO → FP	.212	.062	.089	.335
Total effect	.410	.054	.303	.516
Indirect effect	Effect	SE(Boot)	LLCI(Boot)	ULCI(Boot)
H5a: EO → PT → FP	-.090	.038	-.167	-.016
H5b: EO → BT → FP	.193	.039	.119	.274
H5c: EO → NRA → FP	.056	.020	.022	.099
H6a: EO → PT → NRA → FP	.053	.016	.025	.088
H6b: EO → BT → NRA → FP	-.014	.007	-.031	-.022

Note: EO = Entrepreneurial orientation; PT = Political ties; BT = Business ties; NRA = Network resource acquisition; FP = Firm Performance.

indirect effects is presented in EO had a significant negative effect on firm performance via political ties ($b = -.090$, 95% CI = $[-.167, -.016]$) since the CI do not include zero, partially accepting H5a. EO had significant and positive indirect effects on firm performance via business ties ($b = .193$, 95% CI = $[.119, .274]$) and network resource acquisition ($b = .056$, 95% CI = $[.022, .099]$), thus supporting H5b and H5c.

We next turned to testing our hypothesized sequential indirect effects. Our final hypotheses (H6a and H6b) theorize that the effect of EO on firm performance would be sequentially mediated by political ties, business ties and network resource acquisition. The results showed that the sequential indirect effect of EO → political ties → network resource acquisition → firm performance was positive and significant ($b = 0.026$, 95% CI = $[.011, .045]$), supporting H6b. Results show that EO has a negative sequential indirect effect on firm performance: EO → business ties → network resource acquisition → firm performance ($b = -.014$, 95% CI = $[-.031, -.022]$), partially supporting H6c. Taken together, our results show that women tourism entrepreneurs' business ties negatively affect their network resource acquisition and political ties have negative influence on the performance of ventures owned by women in the two study countries.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Drawing from network theory, our first intention was to advance knowledge in the entrepreneurship literature by providing more insight into the intermediate structure in the EO-firm performance link. To test

our theoretical model (Fig. 1), data were collected from female entrepreneurs operating in the tourism industry in Nigeria and Ghana, two developing African countries. Building on our empirical findings, results showed that EO has direct effects on business ties, political ties, and resource network acquisition (NRA). This finding is in line with previous studies that revealed positive relationships between EO and political ties, business ties, and resource network acquisition (Jiang et al., 2018). Also, we found that political ties directly and significantly affect network resource acquisition which is in line with previous studies (Sami et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2015). Surprisingly the effect of business ties on network resource acquisition was found to be significant but negative, contradicting previous studies (Kimbu et al., 2019; Li et al., 2009). Additionally, the effect of political ties on firm performance was found to be significant but also negative, further contradicting existing studies which found that in some developing countries, firms are able to improve their performance by stabilising solid ties with governmental agencies and politics (Boso et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2018; Li & Zhang, 2007). Moreover, the results also support previous studies that found the positive effect NRA and business ties exert on firm performance (Davidsson & Honig, 2003; Jiang et al., 2018; Sirmon et al., 2007).

Additionally, the direct effect of EO on firm performance was positive and significant supporting the results of previous studies (Ireland et al., 2003; Kallmuenzer et al., 2019). As such, we found that EO indirectly influences firm performance via the mediating effects of political ties, business ties and network resource acquisition. Although there are no studies that proposed these indirect effects, there are some indications in the literature that support these relationships (i.g., Jiang et al., 2018; Kallmuenzer et al., 2019). Taken together, we demonstrate that social networks and resource acquisition are important strategic intermediate variables that link EO to firm performance in resource scarce contexts (Jiang et al., 2018; Kimbu et al., 2019; Li & Zhang, 2007; Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2016). Furthermore, our results revealed that when it comes to networks, political ties are a more important factor for firms to access resources and as such are indirectly relevant predictors of firm performance. The component of political ties was revealed to be irrelevant to firms led by women entrepreneurs in resource-scarce contexts where women seeking to create networks with men is frowned upon as they are perceived to lead to immoral behaviours. This finding contradicts previous studies conducted in other contexts that showed a positive and direct relationship between political ties and firm performance (Li & Zhang, 2007; Sheng et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2017).

Finally, our results support our proposed hypotheses showing that

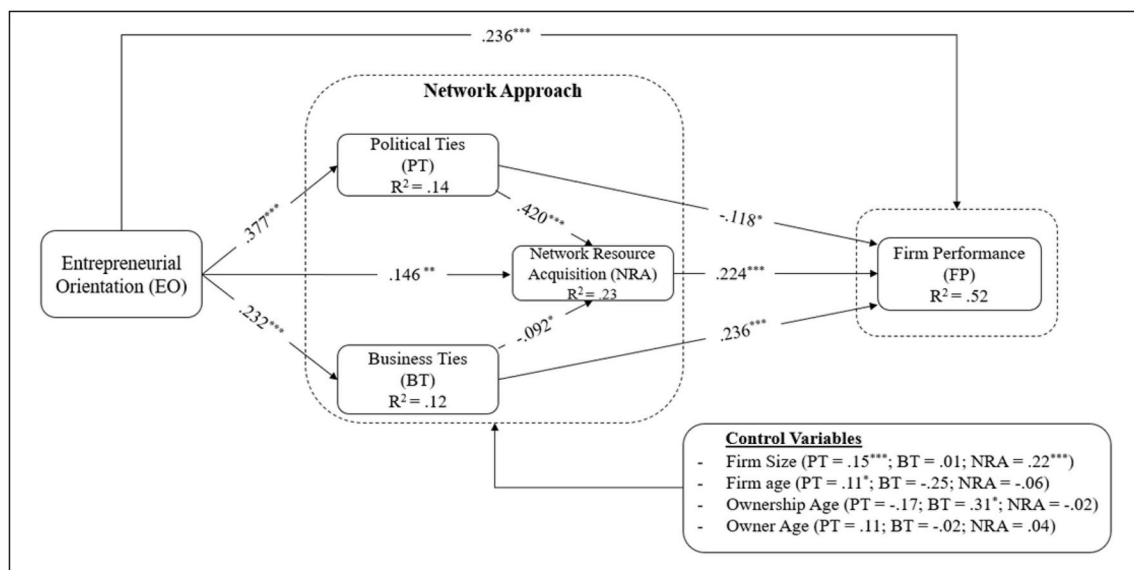


Fig. 2. Results of structural equation modelling. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

the relationships between EO and firm performance was sequentially mediated by political ties and network resource acquisition, and then by business ties and network resource acquisition. To summarise, the findings of this study offer valuable contributions to EO, networks and firm performance literature, as well as relevant practical implications.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our novel theorizing and empirical analysis make several contributions to entrepreneurship, network and firm performance literature. First, unlike most of the past literature testing the intricate EO-performance nexus by examining wide-ranging boundary circumstances (Anderson et al., 2015; Lomberg, Urbig, Stöckmann, Marino, & Dickson, 2018), this study incorporated three intermediate variables – political ties, business ties, and network resource acquisition – to break up the direct relationship, offering different and complementary explanations for the inconsistent findings gained from previous research (Lomberg et al., 2018). Our results demonstrate that the advantage of establishing strong political ties with government agencies, business ties with suppliers and accessing and acquiring resources from network actors are important means by which EO contributes to firm performance, especially those owned/managed by women. Previous EO studies that already examined mediating mechanisms mainly focused on factors that were internal to the firm as explanatory variables to explain the EO-performance relationship (Kollman & Stockmann, 2014; Li et al., 2009), without considering the potential role of external network factors in the environment in which the firm operates. Rooted in network theory, this study has highlighted the need to (re)examine the effects of external factors in the EO-performance link. The findings indicate that external networks provide useful contexts to understand how firms operate since networks considerably impact how organisations are developed, managed and sustained (Kimbu et al., 2019, 2021; Li, 2009; Pollack et al., 2012; Robins, 2015; Zhang et al., 2020). Indeed, networks provide the contexts that shape not only operational decisions but also tactical decisions and therefore have the potential to intervene in the relationship between EO and firm performance (Boso et al., 2013; Li et al., 2009). We are faithful that our exertion to assess this phenomenon from a network perspective provides an increased understanding of the nature of the value creation process of EO on firm performance.

Secondly, our theorisation and results in relation to the effects of political ties and business ties as determinants of network resource acquisition which ultimately influence firm performance confirms the idea that strong networks with government agencies and suppliers enables tourism MSMEs to access and utilise resources which they would otherwise not be able to obtain without these ties. Specifically, strong external networks are important to understand the performance of women-led entrepreneurial organizations in resource-scarce contexts. Put differently, these findings shed light on how certain types of networks may impact women tourism entrepreneur's access to resources and the effect on their firm performance (Kimbu et al., 2019) and ultimately influence their quality-of-life and well-being (Kimmitt, Muñoz, & Newbery, 2019; Shir, Nikolaev, & Wincent, 2019). In this regard, as far as the authors are aware, this study is the first to empirically evaluate EO and networks as determinants of entrepreneur satisfaction with the firm performance, therefore contributing to the theoretical advancement of tourism entrepreneurship research literature within developing countries.

Third, in relation to women tourism entrepreneurs' resources acquisition, as far as we know, this study is the first to offer fine-grained insights and empirical evidence that strong ties with politics and government agencies is the main determinant of firms' ability to leverage their networks to acquire resources in resource-scarce environments. This implies that, in the context of tourism, establishing strong political ties is critical in accessing resources that ultimately can lead to a competitive advantage among women entrepreneurs (Kimbu et al., 2019). However, in relation to business ties, our findings revealed that

establishing strong networks with suppliers and competitors inhibit women entrepreneurs' ability to access and acquire resources for their ventures despite the fact the EO positively influences business ties. This finding contradicts previous studies that advocate that ventures with strong business ties have greater chance to acquire more resources from their networks (Li et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2020). In line with this contradiction, our theorisation reinforces the assumption that in some developing economies with patriarchal societies, women entrepreneurs encounter stereotypes that challenge their abilities to establish wider business ties and engage in network resource acquisition at the same scale as male entrepreneurs (Kapinga & Montero, 2017). In this regard, this finding suggest that not all businesses are able to acquire resources from their business ties and that in some contexts such as in Ghana and Nigeria, while women may have the entrepreneurial ability to establish business networks, they may be challenged by negative socio-cultural challenges and societal expectations that prevent them from being aggressive in resource exploitation, especially if the owners of firms they have established such ties with are males. Women who establish close ties with business owners/executives who are males are sometimes labelled as deviants or prostitutes (Kimbu et al., 2019). Our theoretical logic and empirical findings inform our understanding of firm resource acquisition through their networks within the tourism industry in resource-scarce contexts. Precisely, the findings show that overlooking MSME's access to resources might thwart researchers from recognising significant patterns and lessons to support MSMEs which make up more than 70% of all tourism businesses. Indeed, by proposing and testing this relationship, our study makes a novel contribution to the entrepreneurship literature.

Fourth, our findings also reveal that EO-firm performance is maximized indirectly via the external network approaches of the company in the form of business ties and minimized by political ties women entrepreneurs establish with government officials. This new input to entrepreneurship literature offered by the present research shows that the establishment of business network ties enhances the effects of strategic orientations on firm performance outcomes amongst women-led entrepreneurial organizations operating in resource-scarce contexts. Interestingly, the current study shows that women-led entrepreneurial firms operating in the tourism sector in Nigeria and Ghana are keen to establish strong networks with government officials to access and acquire resources, but this strong political tie has no direct effect in their firm performance. One plausible explanation for this could be the socio-cultural norms and practices in these societies that do not allow too much interactions between women and men (who predominately occupy important political positions) and are frowned upon as leading to immoral behaviours (Boso et al., 2013; Kimbu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, while the women entrepreneurs have the capacity to establish political ties, they are unable to exploit these ties to gain the competitive advantage and hence the findings as observed in this study. Our finding contradicts the current literature which claims that in some developing economies, firms are able to improve their performance by developing strong ties with governmental agencies and politics (Boso et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2018; Li & Zhang, 2007). Additionally, the findings in this study indicate that while EO has direct positive effect on performance its indirect effect through business ties is negative, further pointing to the peculiar situation of women tourism entrepreneurs in Ghana and Nigeria. Indeed, it is the case that sometimes the political ties established by women could work against them simply because they are women. Either they are expected to be less aggressive in exploiting the resources that come with the establishment of such networks, or they are perceived to be less competitive and successful compared to male entrepreneurs and therefore owners of the resources within the established political ties do not make such resources available to women entrepreneurs in the same manner as male entrepreneurs. Simply belonging to a political network does not guarantee access to the resources it offers. In most developing countries, ties with government agencies (political ties) are layered based on gender, ethnic and nepotistic considerations and

therefore members of such networks that are less favoured may actually have their resources diverted to those highly favoured within the network. Also, women-owned tourism businesses that are noted to be linked to government agencies, may have their women owners being stereotyped as promiscuous (as most of these government agencies are dominated by men) which may negatively affect their performance. Nonetheless, the findings show that political ties have indirect positive effect on performance through resource acquisition and this could be explained by the idea that women entrepreneurs are able to form networks with fellow women entrepreneurs through which they acquire considerable resources to advance the performance of their business (Kimbu et al., 2019; Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019). Kimbu et al. (2019) note that women entrepreneurs are able to form networks with their fellow women entrepreneurs and exploit such networks to enhance the performance of their firms since such networks are devoid of the negative gendered socio-cultural challenges that typify the network resource acquisition efforts of women entrepreneurs within the broader business space. Taken together, our results offer stimulating extensions to the studies of Boso et al. (2013) and Jiang et al. (2018). However, the pattern we reveal is novel to the tourism entrepreneurship literature and validation of these results in different tourism destination contexts is paramount.

5.2. Managerial implications

In addition to the above theoretical implications, this study also has several managerial implications. First, in spite of the fact that the effects of EO varies across companies in different sectors and stage of development within the country where they are operating, and depending on their access to resources, there is an overall significant effect of EO in the contexts we have studied. In other words, our findings confirm previous research, which shows that EO generally contributes to tourism firms' abilities to cultivate internal and external networks (resource acquisition and business ties) and also maximizes performance benefits.

Second, EO can be used as an instrument to overcome limitations imposed by limited access to resources (i.e., financial capital) and in environments where new opportunities are scarce and constrained by many factors. Amidst the current COVID-19 (SARS CoV-2) pandemic, the study offers clarity to entrepreneurs and managers on the critical role of network resource acquisition in enabling firm performance. Further it intimates that women tourism entrepreneurs could potentially benefit by investing in attracting such network resources if they are interested in maximising their EO potentials to achieve better performance, differentiating their firms from competitors and thereby helping to cope with the impacts of the pandemic and speed up the recovery of their businesses.

Third, the study demonstrates that significant efforts are needed to cultivate business network ties to maximize the benefits of firm performance in institutionally-challenged settings such as those in Nigeria and Ghana. Therefore, we exhort women entrepreneurs to boost their external network ties (for example through registering and joining relevant industry and trade organisations, legalising their operations, participating in state-led tourism development initiatives) if they want to obtain more enriching and rewarding benefits for their entrepreneurial activities.

Finally, and in relation to policy, governments and development agencies in resource-scarce countries should endorse educational and training agendas to help entrepreneurs comprehend how to establish higher levels of EO and cultivate stronger external network ties relevant for business survival and growth.

5.3. Limitations and avenues for future research

This study has several limitations that open avenues for further research. Firstly, the findings are context-specific because our focus was on women entrepreneurs operating in the tourism industry in two

emerging destinations of sub-Saharan Africa, namely Nigeria and Ghana. This may introduce some bias to our results and may limit the generalizability of our findings to other context and cultures out of West Africa in particular and sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. Future studies should replicate and expand our study to other contexts and tourist destinations in different phases of their tourism development. This might disclose even more refined structures of the EO-firm performance link. Future studies should also collect data from both women and men tourism entrepreneurs to understand the EO-firm performance outcome link and whether gender is a proxy that influences business access to resources and building social networks.

Secondly, this study used cross-sectional data that may limit the ability to detect changes in entrepreneurs' behaviour. Further studies should take longitudinal approaches to better understand whether and how entrepreneur's behavior evolves over time. Additionally, since the data for this study were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, analyzing the proposed model in a post-COVID-19 pandemic context would enable an understanding of how the current COVID-19 pandemic-induced crisis is influencing women entrepreneurs' behaviour and performance. Future research should investigate and explore whether in patriarchal and gender-biased societies, gender may reinforce discriminatory practices and limit women's access to resources in the post-COVID-19 context and make it difficult for women entrepreneurs to establish strong business ties and political ties (Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020).

Thirdly, another potential limitation is related to causality. Since our data are cross-sectional in nature, but in line with most of the data used in research on EO-firm performance link (e.g., Boso et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2018), we were unable to test for the occurrence of possible lagged effects amongst the predictor and outcome variables to refute alternative explanations. Therefore, our findings cannot rebut alternative explanations.

In addition to the above-mentioned research avenues emerging from our study's limitations, there are opportunities for further studies flowing from our findings. There is an indication that high level performance of firms led by women entrepreneurs might lead to enhancing entrepreneurs' experience, greater well-being and improved quality of life (Shir et al., 2019). However, because of the nature of tourism MSMEs operating in resource-scarce contexts, these assumptions may not always hold. Future studies could extend our model and empirically test this linkage by investigating whether the effects of EO, network approach and performance outcome lead to entrepreneurial well-being and quality-of life. This may be important to understand whether firms with more satisfied owners continue to venture and expand their businesses. While this is a logical assumption, it has not been rigorously tested in the tourism entrepreneurship context.

Author statement

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2021.104343>.

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